

Research and Perspectives on Development Practice



**Title >> Roles of NGOs in Community Empowerment  
for Natural Resource Conservation: A case  
study of two NGOs in North Wollo, Ethiopia**

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## Biographical Details

Currently Zenebe Mekonnen is Livelihood programme manager for Concern Ethiopia. His main areas of interest are civil society, environment, livelihoods and community empowerment.

## Abstract

This paper is a summary of a thesis submitted to the Kimmage Development Studies Centre, Dublin, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MA in Development Studies. The paper focuses on the work of two NGOs working in northern Ethiopia. It analyses the natural resource management programme components of these NGOs and their efforts at community empowerment, with particular focus on the issues of community participation, training/awareness creation and institutional formation, together with challenges and the available opportunities. The thesis argues that the effective engagement of an NGO in community empowerment processes entails organisational orientation in terms of its vision, principles, goals, strategies and its activity components.

The research utilised a qualitative approach using a purposive sampling method. It was found that in terms of their programme components, both organisations have yet to position themselves in a way that helps them address the existing power relations to facilitate the community empowerment process. Despite the NGOs' efforts in awareness creation and community institutional formation, the community is still dependent on external agents to mobilise them for self-development activities. The thesis recommends that there is a need for raising the level of consciousness of the community, and the institutions established at the community level have to be in the form of an association fully controlled by the community, and not merely an instrument for control.



## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Concepts and Significance of Natural Resource Management

Understandings of the concept of natural resource are diverse. According to Gilpin (1996, p. 156), "it is any portion of the natural environment such as the atmosphere, water, soil, forest, wildlife, land, minerals and environmental assets generally". It is the backbone of every economy directly or indirectly. In particular, for developing countries like Ethiopia, where about 85% of the population are living in rural areas and dependent on agriculture, natural resources are the base for economic development, food security and other basic necessities (Alemneh, 2003).

However, as the different research findings reveal, the rate and extent of natural resource degradation is appalling. For instance, according to Karamachandani (1989, cited in Azene, 2001, p.137) "20% of the [Ethiopian] highlands<sup>2</sup> are in a seriously eroded condition and a further 24% in moderated erosion condition. The annual soil loss due to erosion is estimated at between 1.3 and 3 million tons, 10% of it is carried away irretrievably by streams".

Cognizant of this fact of resource degradation<sup>3</sup> and its consequences, various debates have been made in academic and policy circles about appropriate resource conservation<sup>4</sup> approaches through appropriate policy and institutional reforms (Tarekegn, 2001). These approaches range from a centralised state based natural resource management approach on one side of the spectrum, to community based natural resource management (CBNRM) on the other side.

The centralised state based Natural Resource Management (NRM) approach is mainly based on the argument of Hardin's tragedy of the commons model, which assumes that common property<sup>5</sup> means the same as 'open-access'<sup>6</sup> and that such resources are doomed to overexploitation, since each resource user places his or her immediate interest above that of the community (Eyasu and Trench, 2001). This argument has persuaded many policy makers to favour policies that promote either strong central management or complete privatisation of the resources (Paul Lee, 2002, p.7). In the case of Ethiopia, during the 1970s and 1980s the government took the initiative to counteract the resource degradation of the country by adopting a top down centralised approach to conservation.

In this government owned approach, little emphasis is given to involving the community that has a link with the resources. Rather, as Azene (2001, p. 152) argues, "farmers have been considered ignorant of proper land use management although they have engaged in agriculture for millennia. Consequently, they have been excluded from planning, and commenting on, strategies and technologies of implementation".

Though, in quantitative terms, the achievement of this national effort was impressive (Yeraswork, 1995), lack of the full involvement of the community has made it short lived and interpreted differently. As Dessalegn (2001b, p. 38) pointed out, "to many peasants,

2. The highlands of Ethiopia comprise 44% of the country, include 95% of the cropped area and two-thirds of the country's livestock" (Kruger, et al, 1996, p. 171).

3. Land Degradation is "a decline in the productivity of an area of land or in its ability to support natural ecosystem or types of agriculture. Degradation may be caused by a variety of factors including inappropriate land management techniques, soil erosion, salinity, flooding, clearing, pests, pollution, climatic factors or progressive urbanisation" (Gilpin, 1996, p. 132). In this research, land degradation and resource degradation are used interchangeably.

4. Conservation: is defined by the World Conservation Strategy as "the management of human use of the biosphere so that it may yield the greatest sustainable benefit to present generations while maintaining its potential to meet the needs and aspirations of future generations"(Gilpin, 1996, p 145).

5. Common Property: Feeny et al. (1998) define common property resource as "the resource held by an identifiable community of interdependent users in which these users exclude outsiders while regulating use by members of the local community. Within the community, rights to the resources are unlikely to be either exclusive or transferable; they are often rights of equal access and use" (cited in Adhikari, 2001, p. 6).

6. Open access: Bromley (1991) considers the open access situation as "a resource regime in which there are no property rights. There is no defined group of user's or owners and benefit streams from the common pool resource are available to anyone. Individuals have both privileges and no rights with respect to use rates and maintenance of the asset. This is a situation of mutual privilege and no right; no user has the right to preclude use by any other party. In this case there is a failure to deal with the obvious reality that, as the size of the community grows, and therefore the number of rights holders increases, the total demands on the resource will ultimately exceed its rate of regeneration" (1991, cited in Adhikari, 2001, p.4).



‘conservation’ came to be synonymous with the appropriation of local resources by the state”. Consequently, the local community turned against the program and in Ethiopia in particular, during its period of instability, national parks and forests were set on fire, and various wild animals were killed (Shibru and Kifle, 1998).

In contrast, CBNRM starts with communities as a focus and foundation for assessing natural resource uses, potentials, problems, trends and opportunities, and for taking action to deal with adverse practices and dynamics (Little 1994 cited in Uphoff, 1998). It advocates partnership in which community is considered as the main actor in decisions and selection of appropriate technology and overall management, as they are the frontier of both the risk and benefit of the resource management efforts (ibid).

Nevertheless, many advocates of the participatory approach to natural resource management further question the rhetoric of ‘community participation’. It is apparent that a true participatory approach, in which the communities express their feelings and take part in the decision-making, is possible only if they have room in the prevailing power structure to mediate access to and control over particular resources.

A number of scholars undertaking research in the field of participatory resource management have emphasized the significance of community empowerment as a pre requisite for sustainable management of natural resources. In this regard, Dessalegn (2001a) notes the unequal power relations between the state and the peasantry in which the latter is always the victim, as one of the main reasons for accelerated environmental degradation in Ethiopia.

## 1.2. The Research Focus

This research studies the roles of two Non- Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in community empowerment for natural resource conservation in Bugna district of North Wollo Zone, Amhara National Regional State of Ethiopia.

The first NGO, hereafter called MEDA<sup>7</sup> is an international humanitarian child centred community development organisation without religious, political or government affiliation. It was founded in 1937. Now it is an international federation of 17 national donor organisations from North America, Europe and Asia, and is operating in 45 developing countries. The organisation started its program in the research area under the title of “Child Centred Community Based Integrated Rural Development Project”.

According to the information from its staff, MEDA’s vision is ‘of a world in which all children realize their full potential in societies which respect people’s rights and dignities’. Its mission is ‘to achieve lasting improvements in the quality of life of deprived children in developing countries through a process that unites people across cultures and adds meaning and value to their lives’. One of the principles of the organisation focuses on ‘empowerment and sustainability’, where it seeks to strengthen the long-term capabilities of all community members to manage matters that affect the well being of children.

7. The name of both NGOs used for this case study was kept anonymous as the target of the research was for documenting the experience of the NGOs rather than evaluation. Hence, I used the words YIMRHA and MEDA to represent the names of the two NGOs.



The second NGO, hereafter called YIMRHA, started its operation in Ethiopia in 1974, when it initiated the implementation of an emergency project in the most remote areas of the present day North Wollo Zone. The overall goal of its intervention in the project area was to 'improve the living conditions of people in Bugna Wereda,<sup>8</sup> North Wollo Zone, thereby giving special attention to poor and marginalized groups, to the needs of women and their position in society, and to the sustainable use of natural resources'. YIMRHA sees its role as a facilitator.

- The specific objectives of the research are:
- To examine the impacts of NGOs in empowering the community for natural resource conservation in terms of community participation, institutional formation, and awareness creation.
- To identify the challenges of NGOs in community empowerment processes.
- To identify the opportunities NGOs have in community empowerment processes for natural resource conservation.
- To examine the feeling of the community about their sense of empowerment.

### 1.3. Research Approaches and Methods

The research entailed in-depth analysis of the community and NGOs concerned. It followed a qualitative research approach. According to Sarantakos (1998), unlike quantitative approaches, which perceive reality as a sum of measured or measurable attributes, qualitative approaches enable researchers to research people in natural settings. Moreover, it helps achieve a deeper understanding of the respondent's world and considers the respondents as experts whose views are sought (Sarantakos, 1993).

The research also used a case study method to analyse the work of the two NGOs selected for this study and the samples were selected purposively to include different strata of the community (rich, middle class and poor; men and women; young people and elders) and respondents from the relevant organisations whom the researcher thought to be appropriate sources of information.

The main data collection methods employed were secondary data collection, Key Informant Interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and observation. Twenty nine key informants were contacted for interviews, and FGDs were undertaken in seven villages. The focus group discussions were tape recorded and transcribed.

8. Wereda is the second lowest hierarchy, next to Zone, in the government administrative structure. It is equivalent to a District



## 2. Roles of the NGOs in Community Empowerment: What Has Been Done on the Ground?

### 2.1. Empowerment

Empowerment has become a central concept or even a buzzword in development discourse and practice (Rowlands, 1998 and Oakley and Clayton, 2000). It is a word frequently heard at different levels, from the UN to the grassroots movements. Moreover, it is a concept which is applied to different levels, starting from the individual but also including the group, the community, institutions, ethnic groups, migrants, women, etc. (Gebert and Rerkasem, 2002).

Despite this widespread use of the term, empowerment remains ill defined. Rowlands (1998) says, in the development context, its users tend to assume that the appropriate meaning will be understood without being explained. Its complexity has exposed it to a wide variety of interpretation (Oakley and Clayton, 2000). Rappaport (cited in Gebert and Rerkasem 2002, p.1) also states that “empowerment is like obscenity, you don’t know how to define it but you know it when you see it”.

Owing to the complexity of the concept, understanding empowerment entails considering the concept of power, which is at its base. Nevertheless, power by itself is a complex concept. The dominant understanding of power has been as “ ‘power over’ where one person, or grouping of people, is able to control in some way the actions or options of another. This can be overt, such as through the use of physical coercion, or hidden, as when psychological processes are influenced in such a way as to restrict the range of options perceived, or lead someone to perceive the desired options as being their own desire” (Rowlands, 1998, p. 12). The ‘power over’ model considers power as in finite supply as a zero-sum: the more power one person has, the less for the other (ibid, 1997).

Veneklasen and Miller (2002, p.45) argue that in power over “power is seen as a win-lose kind of relationship. Having power involves taking it from someone else, and then, using it to dominate and prevent others from gaining it”.

This form of understanding power is discouraging to the poor and powerless as it signifies that the power is with the powerful and nothing is left for them. It compels the poor to accept their powerlessness. It contributes little to encouraging the voiceless and the poor to challenge life threatening factors. Rather it leads them to internalise the message coming from the powerful with its negative connotation so that they will eventually come to believe the message to be true, which is an ‘internalised oppression’ (Rowlands, 1998).

In such an understanding of power, empowerment is about one person bestowing power upon another (Rowlands, 1997). “The difficulty with this interpretation is that if power can be bestowed, it can just as easily be withdrawn; empowerment as a gift does not involve a structural change in power relations” (ibid, p. 12).



The other dimension of understanding and conceptualising power focuses on the process (Rowlands, 1997). In this case, power has a form of ‘power within’, ‘power to’ and power with’ which conceptualises power in positive ways that create the possibility of forming more equitable relationships (Veneklasen and Miller, 2002).

Veneklasen and Miller state that “ ‘power within’ has to do with a person’s sense of self-worth and self-knowledge; it includes an ability to recognize individual differences while respecting others” (2002, p.45). This form of power refers to community members’ internal strength and self-confidence. Its basis is self-acceptance and self-respect, which extend, in turn, to respect for and acceptance of others as equals (Rowlands, 1997).

“Power to” refers to the unique potential of every person to shape his or her life and world (Veneklasen and Miller, 2002). It is the generative or productive power (sometimes incorporating or manifesting as forms of resistance or manipulation), which creates new possibilities and actions without domination (Rowlands, 1997). When based on mutual support, it opens up the possibilities of joint action, or ‘power with’ (ibid).

As mentioned by Veneklasen and Miller (2002, p. 45) “ ‘power with’ has to do with finding common ground among different interests and building collective strength”. It has a sense of the whole being greater than the sum of the individuals, especially when a group tackles problems together (Rowlands, 1997). When power is understood as a process, it is not finite, and empowering one group of the community does not mean disempowering the other. It shows that there is opportunity for all parties to gain power without the expense of the other.

These concepts of empowerment signify that community empowerment goes beyond a materialistic approach of well-being into self-acceptance, that is acquiring ‘power within’, which is not bestowed. It is about taking control of the environment shaping one’s condition. Meanwhile, it is about taking the driver’s seat in shaping one’s own condition, particularly targeting existing power relations.

In the context of natural resource management, community empowerment refers to the community’s position in terms of access and decisions over the use and management of the available resources, as natural resource management often involves multiple stakeholders (the community, the state, NGOs and local institutions) often competing for their use and control. It is about changing the role of the community from mere contributors of labour and finance, as ‘servants’ of the natural resource to a ‘subject’ in its control and use. It is about changing the power relation among the stakeholders in a way that is beyond rhetoric and which enables the community to take an appropriate position to fully participate in natural resource related decisions.





## 2.2. NGO's Organizational Orientation as a Pre Condition for Community Empowerment

The way NGOs orient themselves has an impact on the success of their effort for community empowerment. Korten (1990) has classified NGOs into four generations in terms of their orientation, as indicated in the table (Figure 1) below.

	FIRST	SECOND	THIRD	FOURTH
	Relief and Welfare	Small Scale self reliant local development	Sustainable Systems Development	People's movement
Problem Definition	Shortage	Local inertia	Institutional and policy constraints	Inadequate mobilising Vision
Time Frame	Immediate	Project Life	Ten to Twenty Years	Indefinite Future
Scope	Individual or family	Neighbourhood or village	Region or Nation	National or Global
Chief Actors	NGO	NGO plus community	All relevant public and private Institutions	Loosely defined Networks of people and organisations
NGO roles	Doer	Mobiliser	Catalyst	Activist/Educator
Management Orientation	Logistic management	Project management	Strategic management	

(Source: Korten, 1990, p. 117).

It was pointed out that “a popular comparison between first and second generations distinguishes between giving a man a fish to satisfy his immediate hunger and giving him a fishing rod and teaching him to fish so that in the future he can take care of himself” (Martinussen and Pedersen, 2003, p. 144).

Whereas, the third generation of NGOs were justified on the ground that, with the fishing analogy, teaching how to fish is fine but not enough, as other issues also need to be addressed, e.g., how to gain access to good fishing areas and to markets where they can get a proper price for their catches (Martinussen and Pedersen, 2003). The fourth generation strategy looks beyond focused initiatives aimed at changing specific policies and institutional sub-systems (Korten, 1990, p. 127). Their goal is to energize a critical mass of independent, decentralised initiatives in support of a social vision (ibid). This strategy relates to social movements, which are driven not by budgets or organisational structures, but by ideas, by a vision of a better world (Korten, 1990, p.127).



### 2.2.1. YIMRHA and MEDA and NGO Orientation

The principles, vision and goals of MEDA give due emphasis to sustainability and empowerment of its project targets (community). This goes to the extent of listing critical questions to be asked across its project and programmes to ensure sustainability and empowerment and reducing dependency. However, based on the observation of the actual activities and the analysis of the information obtained from the discussions and interviews, MEDA failed to properly consider its guiding principles during the approach/strategy design and implementation of its activities. It provided payment for all of its activities in the field of natural resource management, which ultimately undermined the initiatives of the community to take care of their own resources. It was not critical about its paid work, designed to respond to the food shortage in the area.

As mentioned above, in terms of its program components and approach, using Korten's (1987, 1990) terminology, MEDA is more oriented towards 'first generation' engaging in welfare activities, although recently it has started to consider the 'second generation' activities incorporating some local development efforts.

Sustainability and empowerment are central to YIMRHA's values, goals and principles, describing its own role as a facilitator. Unlike MEDA, recognising the negative impact of payment on community initiatives, YIMRHA tried to limit paid work to the communal activities in responding to the food shortage of the Wereda. YIMRHA was also engaged in capacity building of the government offices, both at the Wereda and Zone level, as a means for these offices to play a multiple role towards the sustainability of the activities at community level. In terms of Korten's (1990) classification, in its natural resource management project, YIMRHA was oriented towards 'second generation' and 'third generation'. Local, specific conditions determine the type of orientation to follow by, for NGOs. As Korten (1987, p. 149) indicated "a given NGO may find that one of its programs is characterised by a third generation orientation, whereas others may be dominantly first or second generation, each responding to different needs". However, for the empowerment effort of an NGO to be effective, it ought to have a third generation program. Without it, efforts are sustained only as long as the NGO supports the system; and NGOs cannot position themselves to address power relations, which are the base for empowerment processes.

However, the second and third generation activities of YIMRHA were not balanced. Its activities were more inclined to the community level without duly addressing the power relations between the community and the government structure. This negatively affected the sustainability of its impact following the phase-out of YIMRHA from the area.

### 2.3. Effort of the NGOs in Community Participation

Participation is one of the most contested terms in the development discourse. There is a whole gradient of participation; from the rather passive form of people complying with certain activities taking place in their communities; to them also determining activities of projects, from planning to evaluation, to affecting the shape of policy frameworks (the latter being at a level of empowerment) (Gebert and Rerkasm, 2002).



As a tool, participation is a prerequisite for empowerment. Essentially people must, in the first place, participate in order to be empowered (Eklund, 1999). In the community empowerment process, participation helps break the mentality of dependence, which characterizes much development work and, as a result, promotes self awareness and confidence and causes rural people to examine their problems and to think positively about solutions (Oakley, 1991).

### 2.3.1. YIMRHA and MEDA and Participation

The YIMRHA and MEDA staff differed in their perception of the community, which shaped their commitment in involvement of projects. In the case of YIMRHA, there was a belief that the community ought to have a vision of their work if that work was to be sustainable. Moreover, there was a belief that the community has potential and resources (in terms of knowledge, finance and labour) that should be unleashed for the success of the project. Consequently, YIMRHA had given greater emphasis to getting closer to the community to understand and involve them in every one of its activities. YIMRHA encouraged the community to develop their own plans and monitor and evaluate the overall implementation of their activities.

In this regard, during the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with Tewala group (YIMRHA intervention site), one community member stated:

*While working with YIMRHA we were responsible for developing our own conservation plan, site selection, implementation of the plan as the pre designated date, control the activities and evaluate the overall activities of the year during our monthly meeting facilitated by the YIMRHA's Community Development workers [CDWs]. We selected the land to be treated in the year during our general group meeting prioritising the highly affected areas*

YIMRHA openly criticised the coercive and incentive based approach of the government and NGOs working in the area as detrimental to the community's initiatives.

On the other hand, the participatory approach is often dichotomised into means/ends classification (Cleaver, 1999). "These distinguish between the efficiency arguments (participation as a tool for achieving better project outcomes) and equity and empowerment argument (participation as a process which enhances the capacity of individuals to improve their own lives and facilitates social changes to the advantage of disadvantaged or marginalized groups)" (ibid, p. 598). YIMRHA considered community participation both as a means and as an end in itself.

However, this commitment of YIMRHA was only short lived. The community was forced to go back to the coercive approach of the Agriculture Office that took over the project from YIMRHA. Only very limited work was done to improve the approach of the government offices and hence YIMRHA's pilot project remained as an 'island' within the vast coercive and incentive based approach of the government and the NGOs. Moreover, the Agriculture Office did not replace the supervisory and facilitation role of YIMRHA properly and this aggravated the collapse of the project soon after the phase-out period.

In comparison, MEDA staff had limited trust in the community in carrying



out the resource management work. Rather, as one Agriculture Office senior staff member stated, “there is an assumption taken for granted in MEDA that the community will not work without payment”. During the key informant interview, two local staff members of MEDA explained that the community has no interest in doing natural resource work by themselves. Consequently, as one of the MEDA staff interviewed explained “MEDA had been paying for every activity done both on communal and private lands. Only very recently have we stopped to pay for activities done on private lands based on the directive passed from the government not to pay for individual lands”.

Practically, as all contacted (MEDA staff, the agriculture and administration offices) stated, there is no tradition in MEDA's work to involve the community in planning the activities. As one Kebele chairperson mentioned,<sup>9</sup> “it is the responsibility of the Kebele to develop the annual natural resource management plan”. The community is only made aware about what would be done in the year during the general Kebele meeting. The organisation uses the local leaders to convince the community on the already decided plan of work. This is similar to *masamen*- which literally means ‘to convince’ the community on what they already decided. In this case, participation was more a means to accomplish a designated task. In terms of Pretty’s (1994, cited in Kumar, 2002, p.25) typology it is apparently ‘participation by material incentives’.

From the community empowerment point of view, unlike YIMRHA, the initiatives of MEDA contributed little beyond the implementation of the activities. The relationship of the community and MEDA was one of ‘giver-recipient’, rather than being partners supporting each other to accomplish a shared objective. This is typical of first generation NGOs that focus on shortage. This has led the community to perceive MEDA as a source of income. Both NGOs have yet to make an effort to help the community take their own initiative as shown by Pretty (*ibid.*), to challenge the existing power relations so as to properly position themselves in decisions shaping their life.

## 2.4. Institutional Formation

While the activities that have to be done at the household level on both individual and communal lands should not be ignored, natural resource management in most cases requires intervention at the community level. Hence, an effective CBNRM and community empowerment process entails an adaptable local institutional system. According to the World Bank (2002, p. 6), “organized communities are more likely to have their voices heard and their demands met”. Conversely, Yigremew (1999, p. 6) also noted that “unorganised rural poor do not have important bargaining power to withstand both government and bureaucratic influences as well as exploitive private interests”.

The concept of institution, while important, is by itself highly debatable. There is confusion in differentiating the words ‘organization’ and ‘institution’. Watson (2001, p. 107) writes that “institutions are organisations, but they also include the rules and regulations that determine access to natural resources. They define the access that a group has to natural resources, and they also define who has rights within that group”. In the natural resource system, institutions determine who makes use of which resources. Individuals, groups and

9. Kebele is a sub District



organisations are not all situated equally in relation to resource use, and institutions define their differentiated access and use (ibid).

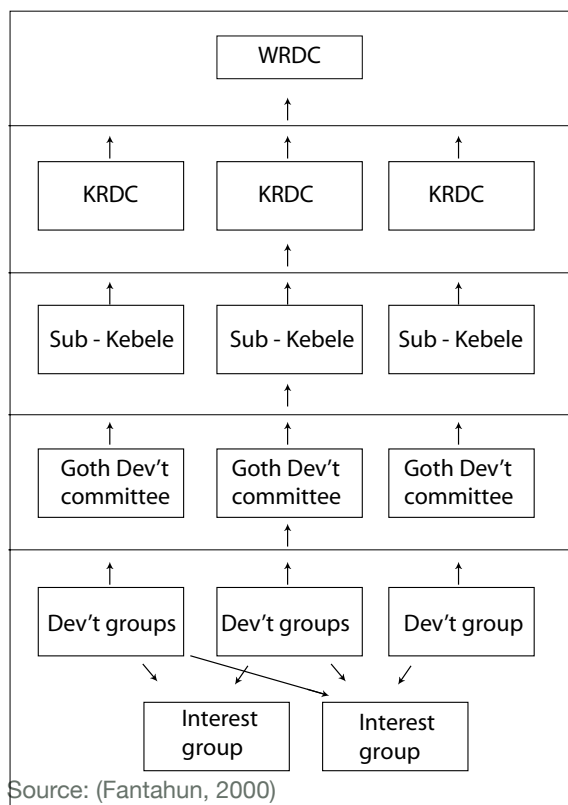
Institutions are about power (ibid). They show the existing power relations within the community and between the community and other development agencies (O’Riordan and Jordan, 1996 cited in Watson, 2001). Moreover, institutions indicate the decision-making system and define who is using the resource (and who is not) and the extent of that use.

### 2.4.1. YIMRHA and MEDA and Institutional Formation

YIMRHA and MEDA followed different approaches to community institutional formation. YIMRHA recognised that the existing government structure is top down. It is more a means of control than creating an opportunity for the community to become involved in decisions affecting their lives and to resist external negative factors. One of YIMRHA’s senior staff members who was interviewed was critical of this approach. He said, “the community has no feeling of ownership of the institutions. It is a blanket recommendation all over across the region. It was given regardless of the local interest. It was not participatory. It was more of political apparatus developed as a means of control”.

Hence, YIMRHA agreed with the community and government offices at the Wereda level, to change the existing organisational structure below the Kebele level to make it fit with the interest of the community (Figure 2). The community was encouraged to establish their own development groups (DGs) and interest groups (IGs). Each development group and interest group developed their respective bylaws.

**Figure 2: The Structure Developed by YIMRHA**



#### Key

**WRDC:** Wereda Rural Development Committee

**KRDC:** Kebele Rural Development Committee

**Dev't:** Development

**Goth:** Is composed of more than one village

**Mender** is a village

This established system could give a voice to the community and create



a spirit of working together. As a result, the community members started to resist the top down orders coming from the hierarchy, which they felt to be against their plan and interest. The Tewala focus group mentioned that “the group and institutional formation established by YIMRHA enabled us to do NRM work as a Debayit<sup>10</sup> unlike the campaign approach of the government which leads the community to be indifferent about the conservation as they have not any say in the decisions”.

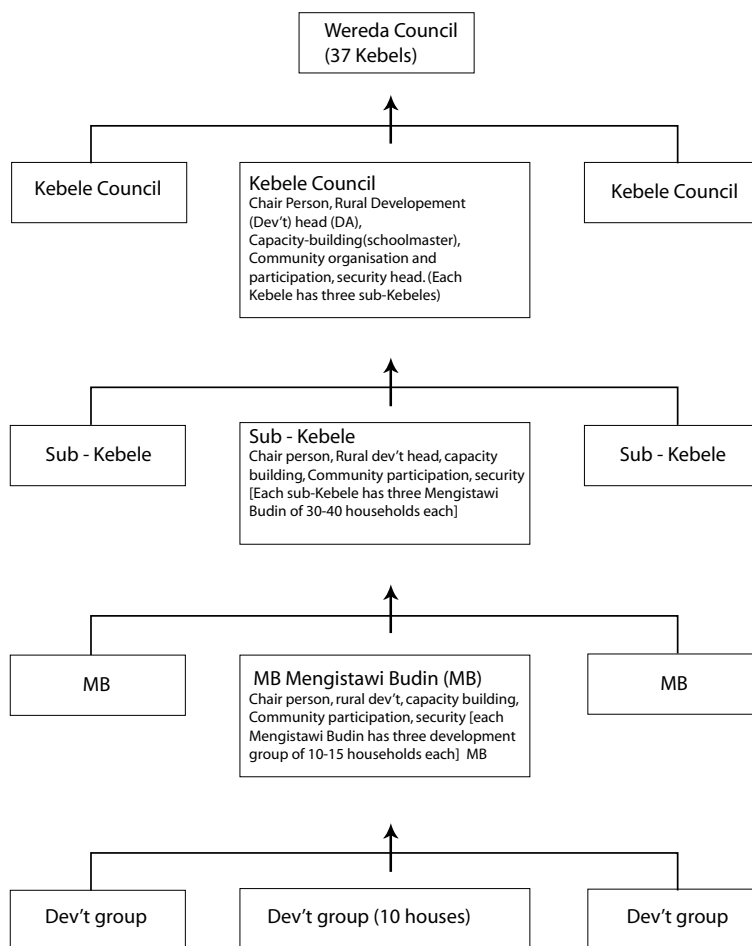
Nevertheless, the local government offices, despite their agreement to the reorganisation process, considered the new system as a threat to their political system. They felt a loss of control over the community. On the other hand, limited effort was taken by YIMRHA to help the Wereda offices own the new system of reorganisation. As a result, the new reorganisation remained an ‘island’ within the local government’s power structure. This led to the collapse of the overall YIMRHA initiated restructuring process following the sudden phase-out of YIMRHA from the programme. During the phase-out, YIMRHA was obliged to hand over the new structure to the Wereda agriculture offices that follow a top down authoritarian structure for the rest of the Wereda. According to Korten (1990, 1987), this is typical of the second generation activities of NGOs as it does not help them to address the existing power relations.

On the other hand, MEDA simply adapted to the existing government structure. Unlike the case of YIMRHA, this gave it an opportunity to reduce the tension with the government. However, as indicated above, from the community empowerment point of view, the structure did too little as the structure is more of a means of control of the people, including how they think, and is a one way channel for a flow of orders that should be absorbed and implemented by the community (Figure 3).

10. Debayit- Local system of working together on the agricultural activities.



**Figure 3: The Structure from the Wereda to the community Adopted by MEDA**



Source: Kebele Offices

## 2.5. Training and Community Awareness Creation

Alemneh (2003) notes that community empowerment requires making substantial investment in human resource development through the training of different community members. The community needs to be informed of the changes in their surroundings.

According to the World Bank (2002, p.15),

*Information is power. Informed citizens are better equipped to take advantage of opportunities, access services, exercise their rights, negotiate effectively, and hold state and non-state actors accountable. Without information that is relevant, timely, and presented in forms that can be understood, it is impossible for poor people to take effective action.*



The approach to trainings/education is a highly debatable concept. Considering this debate of the purpose of education in development, Freire (1973c, cited in Jarvis, 1995, p. 83) makes clear that “education cannot be a neutral process, it is either designed to facilitate freedom or it is education for domestication”. Thus, education as a means of community empowerment should never be about domestication. Rather, as Mezirow (1995, p. 126) notes “the essence of adult education consists of helping adults construe experience in a way in which they will more clearly understand the reasons for their problems and the options open to them, so that they may assume responsibility for decision - making”.

### 2.5.1. YIMRHA and MEDA and Training

Both YIMRHA and MEDA invested a considerable amount of resources in training community members and staff of different offices. In the case of YIMRHA, a training needs assessment of the trainees was undertaken. The organisation followed a mixture of approaches. For professionals and trained community development workers, the training focused mainly on technical capacity building, using both lecturing and field practice. For the community, it was more of a dialogical process where the community was given an opportunity to reflect on their own experience and knowledge. The goal of adult education, as Mezirow (1995, p. 126) puts it is,

*To create reflective dialogic communities in which learners are free to challenge assumptions and premises, thereby breaking through the one-dimensionality of uncritically assimilated learning. Our function is to help learners to critically examine the sources and consequences of their own meaning perspectives and the interpretations they have made of their own lives.*

YIMRHA also tried to put knowledge and experience gained during the training into action encouraging the trainees to develop action plans. However, there were limitations from the YIMRHA side in carefully and seriously following those action plans.

The organisation also recognised the negative impact of training payment on the overall success of the training objectives. It opened discussion at the Wereda level to regulate the training system, which later agreed, through the Wereda development steering committee to issue a per diem payment regulation. YIMRHA also tried to arrange trainings in villages to avoid the complication of payment. However, typical of Bugna Wereda, there remained a complicated mix between interest in knowledge and the interest in money gained during trainings. This has greatly affected the impact of the trainings given.

Similarly, in the case of MEDA, there was considerable investment in trainings. The majority of the community members attended trainings in one way or another. However, there were a number of flaws on the overall training system. There was no due consideration for planning. Rather, it was a financial plan. There was no training needs assessment. The organisation relied more on the Kebele and Sub Kebele leaders for trainee's selection. These leaders considered their political gain in selecting people who supported them rather than being concerned about the attainment of training objectives. Overall, training was considered as an end in itself. There was no system of linking the





trainings and experiences gained with action.

Typical of Bugna Wereda both NGOs were challenged in terms of a complicated mix between interest in knowledge and the interest in money gained during trainings. Though various efforts were made, like organising trainings at village level and developing payment regulation at the Wereda level through the Wereda development steering committee, it remains a problem yet to be solved.

## **2.6. Indicators of Community Empowerment: Perception of the Community About Their Level of Empowerment**

The complexity of the concept of empowerment and lack of precise definition agreeable to all has rendered the measurement of empowerment even more difficult. It has often been discussed but not quantified or measured (Eklund, 1999). As Malhotra et al (2002, p. 17) note, “one of the major difficulties in measuring empowerment is that the behaviours and attributes that signify empowerment in one context often have different meanings elsewhere”. The fact that empowerment is not a static phenomenon, but a process, makes the effort of measurement more complicated. Context can also be important in determining the extent to which empowerment at the individual or community level is a determinant of development outcomes (ibid).

One’s self perception is one indicator of level of empowerment. Bartle (2005) lists the following factors as essential: “Positive attitudes, willingness, self motivation, enthusiasm, optimism, self-reliant rather than dependency attitudes, willingness to fight for its rights, avoidance of apathy and fatalism, a vision of what is possible”. Others also consider the characteristics of the ‘powerless’ in developing indicators for empowerment. According to Freire (1993), powerlessness results from passive acceptance of oppressive ‘cultural givens’ or surrender to a ‘culture of silence’. Conversely, an empowered community should not assume the role of ‘object’ which is acted upon by the environment, but of ‘subject’, which is acting in and on the world.

### **2.6.1. YIMRHA and MEDA and Community Empowerment**

In both organisations, there was over-reliance by the community on the NGOs. In YIMRHA’s intervention area, as the supervision of the YIMRHA’s community development workers was not phased out carefully, the community considered their absence as a sudden shock. Despite the different trainings given and the new institutional formation, the community clearly perceived themselves as being unable to take the initiative to do natural resource management work without some external agent or ‘animator’ to ‘badger’ or pester them. One focus group participant in Debaray and Densa village said that “yemikeseekisen sew yasfeligal”. This means they needed someone who ‘badgers’ them to the work, with a tone of more than facilitation. In the same way, one person in the Tewala focus group stated, “we know how to do and we know it is our responsibility to conserve our soil, but need someone who facilitates and motivates us to start working. Otherwise we become apathetic”.



### 3. Challenges NGOs Faced in Empowerment of the Community

A number of factors have affected the effort of the NGOs in empowering the community for effective management of natural resource. There was difficulty in establishing a true partnership with the government offices due to too much concern on the part of the state over politics when considering new ideas coming from the NGOs. In particular, following the current decentralisation process, the government offices have become unpredictable in terms of their structure and staff and this has greatly threatened NGOs - state relations. Particularly for YIMRHA, its limitations in building relations with the local government offices have led its project to collapse right after the phase-out.

The poverty situation of the Wereda was also one of the obstacles the NGOs faced in truly involving the community in natural resource work. It forced them to associate the payment in the form of cash and food with their programmes, which in turn deepened the sense of dependency in the community. Nevertheless, there was limited effort, particularly by MEDA, to examine how to incorporate the payment into their work without creating dependency.

### 4. Opportunities for NGOs

The government has opened up the agenda of good governance, decentralisation and capacity building for discussion and NGO involvement, at least rhetorically. This has created a political space for NGOs to work on the issue of 'community empowerment'. On the other hand, the government recently started to revise its own approach to natural resource management, advocating resource conservation at the household level. This impacts upon campaigning and mass mobilisation, which is an opportunity for NGOs to broaden and consolidate their community based natural resource management efforts.

### 5. Recommendations for Future Consideration

Based on the key conclusions drawn from this research project, the researcher suggests a number of recommendations for future consideration by NGOs and other actors, who are engaged in the type of NRM initiatives which have been covered in the preceding case studies. These are as follows:

#### NGOs Program Focus

NGOs have to change their focus. They should target powerlessness created by existing power relations. In this case, NGOs should not be merely looking to find faults in the government system, but aim instead to build a true partnership to show direction. The direction must be based on the acceptance that there can be no development through coercion. The effort towards community empowerment can only be effective if NGOs sufficiently incorporate 'third generation' activities and beyond, into their programmes that enable them to effect change beyond one or two "islands of success". NGOs can no longer insist on continuing to operate purely as relief/ welfare organisations. In this



regard, the NGOs should transform their policies and activities to focus instead on 'good governance, decentralisation, and participation', as the government has started to do (at least rhetorically).

NGOs should try to integrate natural resource management back into local farming systems from where it has been detached because of the inappropriate, paternalistic approaches of both the government and NGOs who have often held the view that "farmers cannot do natural resource management activities without some form of coercion or payment". In this regard, NGOs should play an innovative role, making their approach more holistic, aiming to promote a qualitative revolution rather than just focusing on quantitative outcomes.

NGOs should also focus on research and advocacy to make the voices of the poor heard, particularly targeting existing power relations in relation to community empowerment. Moreover, NGOs should improve their networking and experience sharing among themselves.

### **On efforts of NGOs in training community**

There needs to be radical action at the Wereda level to change the existing culture where by trainings given by both NGOs and government offices are linked to payment. If training is delinked from payment, then the true interest of the communities for knowledge and skills can be identified. This should however, be studied properly to avoid the unnecessary extra cost of the trainees.

NGOs, in collaboration with the government offices, should document the impacts and effectiveness of the different trainings given so far in the Wereda. These could be used as a reference for development practitioners. Moreover, the NGOs should develop a system that encourages networking among the community and helps the trainees play a multiplier role.

Trainings have to be need-based and targeted to enhancing the critical thinking ability of the community. They should aim to break the people's 'culture of silence' and culture of reactivity, while also helping to 'unlock' the community's experience and skills.

### **Institutional formation**

- The institutional formation system of the NGOs should duly consider the power relation within and between the community and government hierarchy.

- The NGOs should also enhance the consciousness of the community to elect competent candidates at Kebeles, sub-Kebeles and *Mengistawi Budin*<sup>11</sup> level beyond a mere political loyalty for the incumbent party. Moreover, the NGOs should work towards building good governance and leadership capacity of the elected officials at all levels in the Wereda, to ensure that the political environment is conducive to the community empowerment process.

- If the NGOs are to bring improvement at the level of community empowerment, the system of institutional formation has to be different from the current system of "binding together for control", which is locally called "meternef". Instead of a hierarchical structure, NGOs

11. Mengistawi Budin- is the lowest strata in the government structure below the sub-Kebele, and is comprised of three development groups (30-40 people).



should encourage the establishment of associations, like the farmers associations which are truly controlled by the community, unlike the case of the existing institutions which are meant to control the community. The institutional system should give the community an opportunity to negotiate effectively in decision-making. It should help defend the right of the community members, particularly related to land tenure and issues of access to and control over natural resources.



## 6. Conclusion

In general, the analysis of the findings of the research showed that both NGOs have recognised the importance of community empowerment in their principles. The limitations were in the implementation of these principles and goals. YIMRHA made an effort to improve the level of community empowerment in its program of community participation, institutional formation and training activities, besides the capacity building of the local government offices. Though, as mentioned earlier, institutions are about power relations (Watson, 2001), YIMRHA did not address these relations properly in its effort of institutional formation. On the other hand, despite its principles and the critical questions it developed to appraise its programmes, MEDA selected an approach, which aggravated the dependency syndrome. Hence, the overall findings of the research support the hypothesis that: the NGOs covered in this research have yet to make a significant impact in terms of 'community empowerment' that is ultimately necessary in order for communities to manage their natural resources in a sustainable manner.



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“The highlands of Ethiopia comprise 44% of the country, include 95% of the cropped area and two-thirds of the country’s livestock” (Kruger, et al, 1996, p. 171).

Land Degradation is “a decline in the productivity of an area of land or in its ability to support natural ecosystem or types of agriculture. Degradation may be caused by a variety of factors including inappropriate land management techniques, soil erosion, salinity, flooding, clearing, pests, pollution, climatic factors or progressive urbanisation” (Gilpin, 1996, p. 132). In this research, land degradation and resource degradation are used interchangeably.

Conservation: is defined by the World Conservation Strategy as “the management of human use of the biosphere so that it may yield the greatest sustainable benefit to present generations while maintaining its potential to meet the needs and aspirations of future generations”(Gilpin, 1996, p 145).

Common Property: Feeny et al. (1998) define common property resource as “the resource held by an identifiable community of interdependent users in which these users exclude outsiders while regulating use by members of the local community. Within the community, rights to the resources are unlikely to be either exclusive or transferable; they are often rights of equal access and use” (cited in Adhikari, 2001, p. 6).

Open access: Bromley (1991) considers the open access situation as “a resource regime in which there are no property rights. There is no defined group of user’s or owners and benefit streams from the common pool resource are available to anyone. Individuals have both privileges and no rights with respect to use rates and maintenance of the asset. This is a situation of mutual privilege and no right; no user has the right to preclude use by any other party. In this case there is a failure to deal with the obvious reality that, as the size of the community grows, and therefore the number of rights holders increases, the total demands on the resource will ultimately exceed its rate of regeneration” (1991, cited in Adhikari, 2001, p.4).

The name of both NGOs used for this case study was kept anonymous as the target of the research was for documenting the experience of the NGOs rather than evaluation. Hence, I used the words YIMRHA and MEDA to represent the names of the two NGOs.

Wereda is the second lowest hierarchy, next to Zone, in the government administrative structure. It is equivalent to a District

Kebele is a sub District

Debayit- Local system of working together on the agricultural activities.

Mengistawi Budin- is the lowest strata in the government structure below the sub-Kebele, and is comprised of three development groups (30-40 people).

